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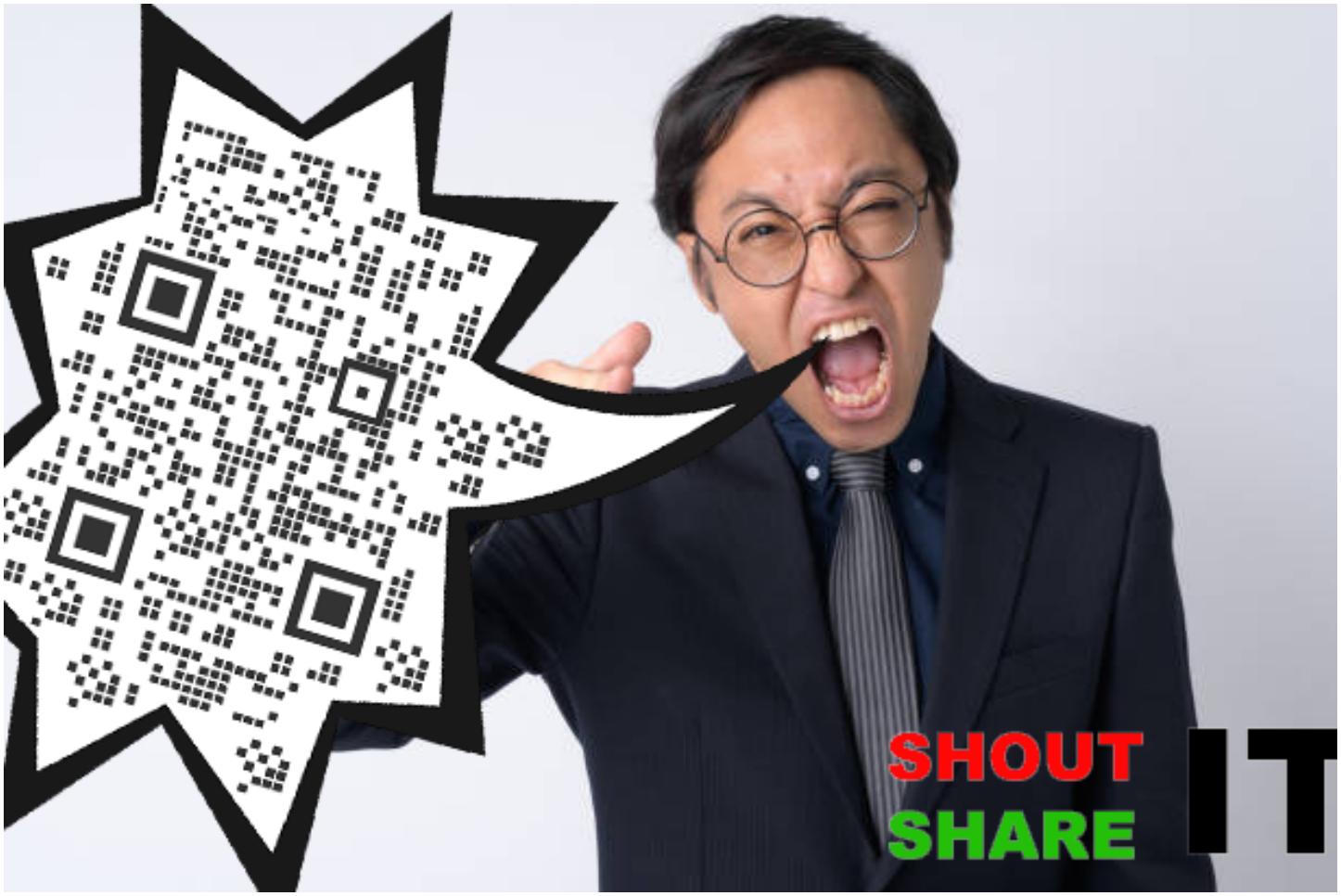
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1894-95

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

REPORT

OF THE

CHIEF OF THE DIVISION OF ORNITHOLOGY AND MAMMALOGY

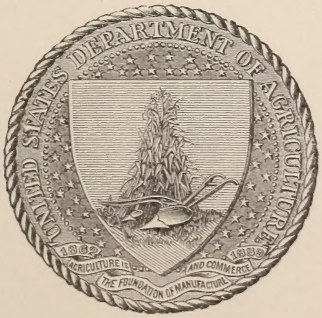
FOR

1896.

BY

C. HART MERRIAM.

[From the Report of the Secretary of Agriculture.]



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1896.

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REPORT OF THE DIVISION OF ORNITHOLOGY AND MAMMALOGY.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE,
DIVISION OF ORNITHOLOGY AND MAMMALOGY,
Washington, D. C., July 1, 1896.

SIR: I have the honor to submit herewith a report on the doings of the Division of Ornithology and Mammalogy for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1896.

Respectfully,

C. HART MERRIAM,
Chief.

Hon. J. STERLING MORTON,
Secretary.

WORK OF THE YEAR.

As in previous years, the work of the division has consisted mainly in carrying on the study of the geographic distribution of animals and plants, and in examining the contents of birds' stomachs in order to determine the nature of the food and the economic status of the various species.

Papers have been prepared and published on the food habits of the meadowlark, Baltimore oriole, catbird, house wren, and thrasher, and a special bulletin on the jack rabbits has been issued. In addition, studies have been completed of the food of the blue jay, red-winged blackbird, cowbird, shrike, and several other birds, and of the long-tailed and short-tailed shrews.

The technical work of revising the groups of North American mammals, preliminary to mapping their distribution, has received as much attention as the available time permitted. Two numbers of North American Fauna containing such revisions (No. 10 on the shrews and No. 11 on the weasels) have been completed and published, and a third (on the genera and subgenera of voles and lemmings) is in press.

BOUNTIES.

In my last report attention was called to the pernicious effects of laws providing bounties for the destruction of mammals and birds. The matter is of such importance that a compilation of existing bounty laws, with statements of the amounts paid under these laws in the various States, and of the animals on which premiums have been paid, has been prepared and will be published at an early date.

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION.

The work of mapping the geographic distribution of mammals and birds has been continued throughout the year. Field work has been done in Virginia, Minnesota, Wyoming, Oregon, Nevada, Lower California, Mexico, western Canada, and Alaska. The principal work of the season is in Oregon, of which State the division is now engaged in making a biological survey. This, as stated in my last report, is a continuation of work already done in other parts of the Great Basin and in the northern Rocky Mountain region.

ROUTINE WORK.

Routine work consumes a large part of the time of the office force, and, as in former years, has consisted of correspondence, attention to the needs of field agents, the tabulation and arrangement of reports and other information received, the identification of specimens, the care of collections, the preparation of reports and bulletins for publication, and of reference lists useful in the work of the division. The number of letters received during the year was about 4,000, and many of them were accompanied by schedules, reports, and notes, which were examined and filed for future reference. During the same time about 3,300 letters were written and several hundred schedules distributed to correspondents; about 200 packages were received and the same number sent out. The demand for the publications of the division is constantly increasing, and the editions of most of the earlier bulletins are now exhausted.

CHANGE OF NAME TO BIOLOGICAL SURVEY.

In the report for 1889 it was urgently recommended that a "Biological Survey * * * be established under the Department of Agriculture, and that the present Division of Ornithology and Mammalogy be merged into it." In partial compliance with this recommendation Congress at its next session (in 1890) authorized the division to undertake a comprehensive investigation of the geographic distribution of animals and plants, but made no change in the name. The investigation so authorized has been carried on up to the present time and has been made the more important of the two lines of inquiry conducted by the division. In your report for the fiscal year 1894–95 you recommended that the name be changed to Biological Survey. This recommendation met the approval of Congress and the change was made at the last session—in the bill making appropriations for the Department of Agriculture for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 1896.

It is believed that this change of name, being a recognition of a broad principle heretofore hidden under a designation implying details, will add dignity to the investigation and to the Department and will materially aid in enabling the division to carry on a comprehensive study of the distribution of life in America with reference to the adaptability of the various parts of our domain to different agricultural and horticultural products—not only those now cultivated in this country, but also those which from their importance in other lands are likely to prove of value if introduced on fit soils and in their proper life zones—and it should be remembered that we include in our own territory all of the life zones from the Tropical to the Arctic.

If it be true that by more intelligent cultivation of the land we may increase the quantity of our crops, thereby augmenting our revenues, it is also true that by the introduction of new crops and new breeds of stock we may increase the number of our products, thereby securing a check on the overproduction of single crops, to the betterment of the condition of our agricultural population. Periods of depression in agricultural pursuits emphasize the necessity of diversifying our resources. Much has been done already, but it has been done, in the main, in a haphazard sort of way and the field is only half cultivated.

Millions of dollars have been wasted in attempts to force crops to grow in unsuitable places. These failures often have the effect of discouraging experimentation with a crop which will thrive and flourish if introduced in the right agricultural belt and on the right kind of soil. What is needed is a broad, scientific study of the complicated relations of animal and plant life to the conditions under which the various species live in a state of nature. When an animal or plant is to be transported to another country, the first step should be to ascertain the life zone from which it came; the second, to place it in the same zone in its new home.

With a view to the acquisition of information and material from other parts of our own continent I am led to recommend the addition to the divisional appropriation of $5,000. This will permit of biological explorations in Central and South America. The well known richness of tropical America, not only in indigenous animal and plant life but also in certain agricultural products, would seem to warrant this small additional expenditure.

In addition to the practical outcome of the work of the Biological Survey, results of educational and scientific value are constantly accumulating. We are rapidly acquiring a more thorough knowledge of our fauna and flora than would have been possible in a century at the usual rate of progress. We are also disseminating information to meet the rapidly growing demand for trustworthy literature on the natural history of our country.

The following estimate of expenditures for the fiscal year 1897–98 is respectfully submitted:

Statutory roll	$10,060
Divisional fund	22,500
Total	32,560